# PART III

# VOICES OF THE GREAT MEN OF THE PAST: PERENNIAL DEBATES

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Many analyses of Raymond Aron's books refer to his exceptionally sharp and subtle intelligence and stress his legacy as an educator, but neither his intellectual subtlety nor his role as a teacher are themselves enough to endow his work with a permanent value. Concerning this matter, Aron himself had no doubts: the contact with exceptional intellects who aspired to be considered at the same level as the "greats of the past" acted as reality's alarm bell. Indeed, while Aron clearly had a great gift for lucid commentary on the philosophy of history, international relations, and political theory, he was also a generous and careful critic of many contemporary and past thinkers. He once remarked that he did not measure his thoughts against those great past thinkers, but preferred to cite them, to interpret them, and to continue their efforts.[1] He has offered posterity some valuable praise and criticism of their ideas, to say nothing of his refining their methods and concepts with a view to analyzing his own time. As such, Aron's insights into other thinkers often serve as an excellent introduction to their own works as well as Aron's, and they are also a starting point for the analysis of today's societies.

The chapters included in this section introduce us to some of the most important conversations in which Aron participated. The texts in this section have been ordered chronologically, roughly according to the period a thinker entered Aron's intellectual life. They will explore the issues that occupied Aron throughout his lifetime: historical determinism, the nature of liberalism and democracy, and ethics and political action.

The reader will notice a recurring theme in this section and even, more generally, in the book as a whole. That theme is the primacy of the political. We shall often see in how many ways this crucial concept becomes manifest in Aron's interaction with the thinkers discussed. For now, it is sufficient to point the reader to Aron's own discussion of the primacy of the political. The primacy of

the political does not entail replacing a unilateral economic determinism, say, with an equally dogmatic and uninstructive political determinism; it does not refer to causal primacy. Nor does it suggest that our interest should be directed solely to political phenomena. What it suggests, rather, is that, in a world that is increasingly living the same history and speaking the same language of technology and economics, it is in the political realm that international actors' differences are most clearly displayed. More to the point, politics is a question of human existence and human ends, to which there is no single answer—perhaps save for on the horizon, as a regulatory idea. Behind every sociological analysis or sober piece of journalism stands Aron the philosopher.

Some of the thinkers discussed in this section had a more difficult time than others did in dealing with this uncomfortable uncertainty about man's destiny. At some point, though, they all confronted the fundamental questions about man's nature and the society in which he acts in their own way. The thinker in whom changes in society had probably produced the most outrageous moral indignation was Karl Marx, Aron's most important and influential "interlocutor." Sylvie Mesure's chapter examines Aron's interpretation of Marx and Marxism. She draws on Aron's writings about Marx, especially the lectures about Marx that Aron gave at the Sorbonne in the 1960s and at the Collège de France in the 1970s. Published in 2002 as *Le Marxisme de Marx*, these lectures illustrate Aron's understanding of Marx and the various forms of Marxism that sprouted up in twentieth-century France. One of the major questions in Mesure's chapter is how one should interpret an author. This becomes particularly troublesome with a writer such as Marx, who posed alternately as a prophet and as a scientist, preaching revolution and then illustrating the inevitable course of history. Mesure shows us that Aron's interpretation was in this regard far more honest than the one-sided and diametrically opposed interpretations of Sartre and Althusser. Ignoring the importance Marx attributed to his economic analyses is just as egregious a disservice to the German thinker as postulating an epistemological break that negates all of his early works. In any case, regardless of the interpretation, there are certain problems with Marx's economics, sociology, and philosophy of history, not the least of them being his historical determinism, buffered by the primacy given to economic factors.

This is a mistake Montesquieu did not make, and if Aron has no problem thinking of himself as an intellectual descendant of this French liberal, it is because he found the latter's respect for the plurality of causes deeply congenial to his own interests. Indeed, Aron declared Montesquieu the founder of sociology—more specifically, of *political* sociology, as Miguel Morgado points out in his contribution. Morgado explores the similarities and differences between Aron's and Montesquieu's approaches to political and social regimes and how these regimes are unique in their respective time-periods. Montesquieu's notion of "principle" is reflected in Aron's own analysis of political regimes as a method of elucidating the struggle between democratic virtue and the sense of compromise that is at the heart of democratic politics. If a polity leans too far in either direction, it is prone to fall into corruption. Morgado concludes his chapter with a discussion of the prosaic nature of democracy.

Any analysis of democracy must perforce lead us to another towering figure within the French liberal tradition: Alexis de Tocqueville. Aurelian Craiutu's chapter looks at the intellectual affinity between Tocqueville and Aron, both of whom were "probabilists," recognizing the essential importance of political phenomena, and both having had the misfortune of finding themselves aligned with the political center in a polarized society. Both saw democracy as one of the fundamental features of their times and both had to contend with the farcical revolutions of 1848 and 1968 and the risible role played by the intellectuals involved. One of the most interesting aspects of this dialogue is the opportunity to see how Aron supplements Tocqueville's insights with some of Marx's observations in order to gain a clearer understanding of industrial society. To some extent, he surpasses both of their analyses in his emphasis on the advancement of science and industry, and increasing productivity.

However, Aron did not measure his ideas against those of the sociologists alone. As Craiutu notes, the primacy of the political also signifies respect for liberties (in the plural) and for choices. Aron spent a great deal of time and energy painstakingly scrutinizing the world in which he lived in order to demarcate the boundaries within which political choices could be made. Thus, we enter the domain of praxeology and Aron's exchanges with two thinkers standing at opposite ends of the ethical spectrum: Machiavelli and Kant.

Diogo Pires Aurélio's chapter deals with Aron, Machiavelli, and Machiavellianism. Had it not been for the Second World War, Aron would have published a book on Machiavelli and Machiavellianism. We only have the remnants of this initially intended project, which were, however, collected and published in 1993 as *Machiavel et les tyrannies modernes*. As Aurélio observes, these papers are less about Machiavelli than about the use to which "Machiavellian" doctrines have been put in the totalitarian era. Aron sees traces of the Florentine's teachings in the politicians of his time as well as in the neo-Machiavellian scholars, such as Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, James Burnham, and above all, Vilfredo Pareto, whose intellectual ties to Machiavelli are investigated in this chapter. Aurélio concludes with a discussion of democracy and Aron's "moderate Machiavellianism."

Pierre Hassner's chapter treats Kant, the subject of some of Aron's earliest philosophical reflections. For Aron the Kantian ideal of a unified humanity always seemed to exist on the horizon, even if its imminent realization in this world was doubtful. Hassner probes the similarities between the two thinkers—their devotion to the aspirations of the Enlightenment and the idea of Reason—though this connection was tempered by Aron's acknowledgment of the tragedy of history and his uncertainty about the "cunning of nature" and man's ability to predict the future. Hassner makes the intriguing observation that by examining Kant's later writings we might more accurately speak of Kant becoming more Aronian than the other way around.

Machiavelli and Kant's ethics are roughly analogous to two ethics later classified by Max Weber: the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction. In their chapter on Aron and Weber, Scott Nelson and José Colen investigate Raymond Aron's ongoing debate with the German sociologist about ethics and

political action. They historically contextualize Weber's ideas and make use of Aron's numerous writings on Weber, especially two unpublished courses of his from the 1970s, *Théorie de l'action politique* and *Jeux et enjeux de la politique*, in which Aron reevaluates Weber's two ethics. In the authors' view Aron proves to have a more coherent understanding of political ethics because he is more attuned to the irreducible variety of political ends and the statesman's need to fulfill faithfully both his obligations and the demands of his conscience.

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The analysis of history is the key to addressing the central political question. Aron does so in the context of the conflicts that would be fought, as Nietzsche foresaw and as Nicolas Baverez has recalled, in the name of man's philosophies and ideas. He has been justly called the "Thucydides of the twentieth century." Nevertheless, the philosophical world of Plato and Aristotle is different from that of Thucydides. When we open the latter's history of the Peloponnesian War, the city is caught in a bloody war and we find ourselves amid statesmen, military commanders and armies, citizens, and demagogues. Aron's city—like Thucydides' city—is in "motion."[2] One might think, however, that the Platonic approach was theoretical or philosophical, and Thucydides' merely historical or descriptive. This would be unfair to Thucydides. As with Thucydides, Aron's theory is based on a philosophy of history—it is a theory and sometimes even a philosophical theory, offering models, both static and dynamic, with deep insights into the human condition and the ways of examining it. We can recall some of them briefly: the "comparative method" which he used is capable of close phenomenological analysis and fine-grained distinctions, vividly bringing to light societies and political systems in their unity and diversity. He avoided the idealization of any actual or potential society as wholly just, free, and equal. He also never forgot values, goods, and the improvements that society and political institutions can pursue.

"Values" or goods we cherish—truth, justice, liberty, equality—are neither transcendental nor found in institutions, which are but imperfect arrangements. There is no perfectly just society: not even democracy is the natural system of the human species, but only one "perfectible artifact" or an "invention." Aron could not describe the best regime in the abstract, ignoring social mechanisms and their results. One consequence of this approach is that he shared with Tocqueville the view that the best friend of democracy is not its flatterer. Aron did not ignore the international scene—the modern nation is not isolated; there are people and groups affected here and now, sometimes tragically, by decisions made somewhere. His method leaves room for something beyond the rational method. People may not behave reasonably despite hypothetical social contracts, and all institutions represent choices related to a particular time and place. But Aron's attention to practical particularities is never merely pragmatic or Machiavellian *Realpolitik*. There are many human activities that we do not understand without the use of standards (truth in science, beauty in art, the good

in ethics). Aron was aware that, even in a fictitious original state, people can have different principles because values and norms are the application of "reason" to particular circumstances that we know empirically and must adapt to different types of society; and, in the public sphere, the references are necessarily multiple, but not unrelated to a reasonable choice. Finally, not being himself a politician, he never ignored the role of the statesman, the recognition of which tends to be absent in current political theory.

Less than clear-cut theories may disappoint. But it is worth remembering that this is an old problem and that necessary simplifications do not always produce even good theories. Someone once said that Plato wrote the *Republic*, a city in the sky, to achieve a better city, and that Aristotle wrote the *Politics* just to make a better theory. However, it is certainly easier to live in the city of Aristotle than in the regime "according to prayer" of Plato. To Aron only possible political regimes can be compared among themselves, and the city in motion was what interested him above all. Only there can we find the political speeches, propaganda, conflict, armies, voting, parties, and all the other elements that populate his theories. Can we have a comprehensive theory about the city in motion? Aron was attracted to those who had tried to discover one—Montesquieu, Clausewitz, and even Marx. But if the power and fertility of this "praxeological" vision can be shown, this can only be done through the study of Aron's insights, hypotheses, and innumerable concrete proposals when seen in light of his explicit or implicit theoretical framework. His own political judgments are in debt to his never-completely-finished-or-articulated theory. As Leo Strauss, who regarded Aron's *Peace and War* as "the best book on the subject in existence,"[3] said, "it is impossible to understand the biggest movement without understanding simultaneously the biggest rest," and "one cannot understand the biggest war without understanding the biggest peace, the peace which, as it were, culminates in the biggest war."[4] That Aron's reflections on "the biggest rest" are necessarily incomplete may, in a sense, be a misfortune, but it is also a challenge that the present volume has attempted to address.

## Notes

1. Raymond Aron, *Mémoires. 50 ans de réflexion politique*, Paris, Julliard, 1983, 746.
2. If we are allowed to borrow Leo Strauss's words about Thucydides in *The City and Man*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
3. Letter of June 11, 1963, Aron Archives.
4. Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, 83.